

Sermon on John 3:1-17
Feast of the Holy Trinity, Sunday, May 31, 2015
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

“Faith Without Doubt...Is Dead”

Do you believe everything you hear? No? I hope not! I guess it depends on who says it. Do you believe a teacher when they say $2 + 2 = 4$? Not until they prove it to you! Do you believe what an anchor reporter says on the tv news? Sometimes. If we believe their sources are correct. But how do you know? Do you believe everything a pastor says? Maybe. When quoting scripture. But when it's a pastor's opinion, or theological deduction, you may say “wait a minute...” At least I hope you do! I only hope that what I say makes you think today about what Jesus said – because that's my job!

You have heard it said that “Faith without works is dead.” And works are a true test of the genuineness of your faith – what you do with your life, not just in words but with your actions, shows what you truly believe. But I say to you, that the truest test of all for faith is: doubt. Because doubt is what every human being experiences when we are faced with the claims of faith – such as serving a God who is invisible (and mostly silent), or proclaiming a human being as Son of God, crucified, dead and buried, who has been raised from the dead. Or to say that there is one God, whom we describe in three persons called “a Holy Trinity.” The logical initial reaction to such audacious claims has to be doubt, or even disbelief. For without doubt, what you believe about God would only be what is certain, and untested, which would not be faith at all! So the title for this sermon today is this: *Faith without Doubt...Is Dead!* So please, don't be afraid to doubt!

I contend that doubt gets a “bad rap” among Christians. After all, on Easter Sunday, when the risen Jesus first appeared among the disciples in the upper room where they were hiding, their first reaction was mixed. Luke writes that they were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost, so Jesus asked them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?” ...And when he showed them his hands and his feet, while in their joy *they were disbelieving and still wondering*” ...so Jesus asked them “Have you anything to eat?” And at the very end of the gospel of Matthew, when the disciples went to Galilee to the mountain where Jesus ascended into heaven, Matthew says, “*When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.*” So we are in good company! All of the disciples had their doubts, even when faced with the living, risen Jesus in the flesh!

Then there is Thomas, who wasn't there the first time Jesus appeared among the disciples. He also gets a bad rap – some have called him “Doubting Thomas” – but he only wanted what everyone else had experienced. So he said “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my fingers in his side, I will not believe.” He wanted to test what the others told him – it's not that he didn't have faith, but he wouldn't believe so quickly what the others told him (perhaps he knew their wishful thinking too well!). So when Jesus did appear to Thomas one week later, Thomas was able to put his finger on his hands, and touch his side, and knelt before Jesus, because what the others had said had proven to be true: Jesus, in fact, was risen from the dead! His doubts about resurrection being possible were turned to life-changing faith, and a full-hearted, “My Lord and my God!” So Jesus encouraged Thomas in his faith, saying “*Do not doubt, but believe!*” Then Jesus proceeded to bless those who were not there, and all readers in the future, saying “*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe!*” For we have the greater test of faith: overcoming our doubts without the physical proof of a risen Jesus standing within reach and sight, but still we believe! And so our faith is so much the stronger, when we face our doubts, yet still believe the gospel.

So, what is “doubt”? It's not the absence of faith, but rather, the testing of it. According to Webster's dictionary, it is to waver in opinion, or to question what you have seen or heard. It can be a lack of conviction, lack of trust or confidence, to be unsettled, or uncertain. Doubt can be a valuable gift when you are an investigative reporter or detective, because then you don't believe on first hearing what a witness tells you. Doubt means that you test what you have heard, for truth and accuracy. Scientists and mathematicians are trained to doubt, and so test every hypothesis, in order to prove with evidence that one's thesis is true. Voters are supposed to have healthy doubts about what they are told in a candidate's promises, and journalists are supposed to test those promises. We are much the poorer in a democracy when voters believe everything they hear from their party's candidates! So if doubt is such a gift in all other human endeavors, why wouldn't we embrace doubt as a tool for a healthy faith? Jesus certainly doubted what the high priests, Pharisees and teachers of the law taught in the Temple and synagogue about God's word! He publicly questioned what they said when he preached and taught in the towns and villages from Galilee to Jerusalem. But what Jesus did NOT doubt was the unfailing compassion and mercy of Almighty God, and the promise of life that was given to every single child of God.

So we heard in our gospel lesson today about a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a teacher of the Law who was troubled about what he heard Jesus teaching – especially after Jesus had cast the moneychangers out of the Jerusalem Temple during Passover. He was intrigued by Jesus' words, and impressed by the signs of God's power that Jesus showed in the miracles of healing he performed. They

made him doubt what he had been taught in the past, so he came to Jesus at night, troubled and uncertain. He said to Jesus, *“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.”* But when Jesus told him that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above, Nicodemus became more confused. *“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”* Jesus explained that he was speaking of things of the Spirit when he said you must be born from above. *“For the wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”* Nicodemus said to him, *“How can these things be?”* As Jesus said, even the teachers of Israel did not understand the mysteries of God, or the things of the Spirit. So it is with us. We do not, we cannot understand everything that is of God – some things will always remain a mystery, open for doubt, like the Trinity – maybe even unresolved in our lifetimes! Jesus’s words are for us today, it seems: *“If I told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can I tell you about heavenly things?”*

But only this is the essential thing: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”*

Unfortunately, too many Christians have forgotten this second sentence in Jesus’ statement – the part about God not sending Jesus to condemn the world, because we hear so many words out of the mouths of Christians that *condemn* others, to exclude them from the community of faith. Perhaps that is why so many in this generation are disassociating themselves from the human institution of the Church, because they hear so much condemnation of other human beings. But they do still long to hear the words of God’s love for all of God’s children, which comes from the mouth of Jesus himself! So they doubt, and we have hope!

So my plea particularly to you graduates today – and to all of you gathered here in the name of Jesus, is this: *be sure to TEST the words coming from Christians and other people of faith – have a healthy sense of doubt about what they say!* Test what people say in the name of the Church, and especially their words in the name of Jesus, according to what Jesus said himself about God’s love! *Jesus was sent among us by God to SAVE people, not condemn them!*

I have said to you before that in the first lecture by my college history professor that the most important thing to learn in college was how to ask questions: not just how, or why, but *how come, and why not?* Actually, that is the main purpose for education: to learn how to ask questions, and not just how to find correct answers, but to ask the right questions, and how to express yourself and the

questions of others! (This is why dictatorships are always afraid of educated people – they are often the first to publicly question what their leaders say!)

And never be afraid to doubt! You can even doubt what I say (actually, you should doubt what I say!) – but then test it by asking good questions, and seek the truth for yourself! That will benefit everybody here, and the whole Church! Those of you who have been to college, or will soon be attending college, will find that the faith you learned in the Church will be questioned – maybe even shattered. That's good! Because that may be what it takes – a bit of doubt and uncertainty – to make you test what you learned, and make faith your own. The risk is that you may find that you might lose your faith for a time, maybe for a long time, and things will never again be so simple as it was when you were a child, listening to the pastor's children's message! But that's good! We all have to grow up – in faith as in all else! Growing in faith is an adult responsibility – and the way to strengthen your faith is to approach it like a child: asking questions, such as *why, and how come?* The promised result in taking the risk to ask questions is a stronger faith, which dares to ask hard questions and grow in maturity of faith!

We will never know all the answers, but if we struggle with what we have been taught from birth, like Nicodemus did, we will experience more of the love of God, which will never condemn us, but leads us all to eternal life, through faith in the one whom God sent: Jesus our Lord. For he risked death itself, to test the power of God's love in our place, on the cross, died and rose again, to give us life everlasting. Thanks be to God for these great gifts of faith, of doubt, and love, through which we receive life in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.